

A HOLY TEMPLE

Ephesians 2:20-22

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Built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit (Eph. 2:20-22).

There is a billboard that I see from time to time that always makes me smile and think about our Lord Jesus. The billboard says, We Buy Ugly Houses. I suppose that means that if your house is in bad shape and no one will buy it, these people will take it off your hands, fix it up, and sell it at a profit. It is probably a good business and one that may actually help people.

What makes me think about Jesus is that he does pretty much the same thing with us. Jesus is not like a prospective home-buyer who travels around with an agent looking for the most attractive, most luxurious house, already all put together, for the least cost to himself. Instead, his motto might be the one on the billboard: I Buy Ugly Houses. Not only is that true, but Jesus also pays not the lowest cost possible but the highest price imaginable. The apostle Paul says to believers, "You were bought with a price" (1 Cor. 6:20), and Peter tells us, "You were ransomed... not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ" (1 Pet. 1: 18-19).

Jesus bought us not because we were so attractive or intelligent or good. What Paul wrote to the Corinthians is true of us, "Not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were

powerful, not many were of noble birth” (1 Cor. 1:26). In fact, like ugly houses, Jesus bought us when we were covered in the guilt and the filth of our sin. Romans 5:6-8 says, “While we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly... God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” That is the good news of Christianity. We are not saved because we are so attractive or worthy in any sense. We are saved because of the compassion and grace of a loving God in Jesus Christ. And the best news of all is not only that Jesus buys ugly houses, but that he fixes them up, and then fills them with his Spirit so that God himself can come to live.

This is the teaching of the apostle Paul in this final passage of Ephesians 2. In Christ, he says, we are “a holy temple in the Lord... a dwelling place for God” (Eph. 2:21-22). This is both Paul’s conclusion to his doctrine of salvation and the bridge he builds to his teaching on the church and the Christian life in the following chapters, which shows us that the church is the outworking of Christ’s saving work in individuals. Here, Paul tells us that the Christian church is built as the temple in which God will live forever; he describes the all-important foundation for the church; and he points to Christ himself as the cornerstone on which this temple rests.

A HOLY TEMPLE

| **P**aul’s main point Paul is that the Christian church is built as a holy temple in which God will dwell. Unlike other buildings that are put together by bricks and mortar, this building is made up of God’s people themselves and bound together by the Spirit of God. The apostle Peter said, “As you come to him [that is, Christ], a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious, you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood” (1 Pet. 2:4-5).

All through the latter half of Ephesians 2, Paul has had in mind the Jewish temple as a way of depicting the peace Christ gives. There was a veil that separated sinful man from God and Christ removed it by his death. There was a wall of division between Jew and Gentile, and that, too, is now gone.

Paul must have thought about the temple as he traveled throughout the ancient world preaching and starting churches. Paul had many difficulties and disappointments, but his heart must have been thrilled to know that just as the stone smiths in Solomon's day worked hard to fashion the great blocks to build that temple, he, too, was working hard for a temple that would shine in glory forever.

The Bible's teaching on the temple begins with God's promise to David that his son would build God's house: "I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever" (2 Sam. 7:12-13). David realized that the Lord was speaking not merely of David's son and immediate heir, Solomon, but also of his future descendant, who would be both son of David and Son of God, namely, the Lord Jesus Christ.

David's son, Solomon, did build God's temple in Jerusalem, and when the ark of the covenant was brought within its walls the glory of the Lord filled the place: "A cloud filled the house of the Lord... for the glory of the Lord filled the house of the Lord" (1 Kings 8:10-11). All of this was symbolic of the true and spiritual fulfillment that would come through Jesus Christ. Some people complain about a spiritual fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies, but here we see that the spiritual fulfillment is the true fulfillment, as the Holy Spirit enters into the forms and symbols of the old covenant, bringing God's transforming presence with grace and power. The true temple is the spiritual house that is Christ's church, which even now is "being joined together... into a holy temple in the Lord." Just as the glory cloud filled Solomon's temple, God wants to fill your life and his church with the Holy Spirit. This is true and saving Christianity, to have God's Spirit live in you and change you to be holy as a fitting dwelling place for God.

This comparison with the Jewish temple tells us a number of things about the Christian church and about Christian people. The first is that we are saved and the church exists for the sake of God's glory. This is what made the temple in Jerusalem special, that God's presence filled the place with glory.

This leads me to ask, What is it that impresses us about a church or a person? Is it the worldly glory that so attracts the natural man? God's glory is displayed not by sheer numbers or by wealth or by fleshly excitement, but by a people who reverence his Word, who worship in spirit and in truth, who display the fruits of God's Spirit, who adorn their lives with good works, and who wave Christ's banner of love.

This is the message God gave through the prophet Zechariah for the Jews who had returned to Jerusalem after the Babylonian exile. The original temple of Solomon's was gone, and the people were now building one far less glorious to take its place. Ezra tells us that while the crowd cheered when its foundation was laid, the old men, who had seen the original temple in their youth, were weeping because of the lesser glory of this second temple (Ez. 3:12). But God declared through his prophet Zechariah: 'I will be to her a wall of fire all around, declares the Lord, and I will be the glory in her midst' (Zech. 2:5). T. V. Moore comments:

We learn here the true glory of the Church. It is not in any external pomp or power, of any kind; not in frowning battlements, either of temporal or spiritual pretensions; not in rites and ceremonies, however moss-grown and venerable; not in splendid cathedrals and gorgeous vestments, and the swell of music, and the glitter of eloquence, but in the indwelling glory of the invisible God.¹

This applies to us as individuals as to the church. The prophet Jeremiah sums this up, saying, "Let not the wise man boast of his wisdom or the strong man boast of his strength or the rich man boast of his riches, but let him who boasts boast about this: that he understands and knows me, that I am the LORD" (Jer. 9:23-24).

The church is, first, for the display of God's glory and, second, it is holy. The temple was a holy building, that is, it was set apart for the worship of God. Inside were holy vessels, used only for God's service, and holy people, the priests, who were set apart to worship God and serve his people. In the same way, the church is to be set apart. We are not to be worldly. There is to be a noticeable difference between us and the world. This of course pertains to sin; as individuals and as a church we are to be marked by a freedom from

¹ T.V. Moore, *Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1979), 141.

| sin and by obedience to God’s Word. But it goes beyond that, to an active desire to know God and live for him.

This will be reflected in our attitude and our methods of ministry. A generation ago, A.W. Tozer spoke words that have been sadly unheeded by the evangelical churches. He wrote, “One of the most popular current errors, and the one out of which springs most of the noisy, blustering religious activity in evangelical circles, is the notion that as times change the church must change with them. That mentality which mistakes Hollywood for the Holy City is... gravely astray.² This is what the apostle John warned the early Christians: “All that is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride in possessions—is not from the Father but is from the world” (1 Jn. 2:16). In the place of things that impress the flesh and the world, ours is to be a spiritual and holy beauty, one that flows from God’s Word as the Spirit empowers it to change our lives. Paul explained what this means for Christians in Romans 12:1-2:

Present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.”

Whenever you talk about living for God’s glory, about being holy, and about serving God with your life, people begin to think dreary thoughts about Christianity and the church. But I want to ask, Is there anything more exciting than this? Is there anything more wonderful than to realize that my life amounts to more than just occupying space and time, than just getting by and trying to have a decent time? I am made to bear God’s image and in Christ I have been born again so that God himself might live in me and shine forth from me. After everything in this world is gone, I will still be a member of this church that is God’s living temple, of which the Book of Revelation says, “It shone with the glory of God, and its brilliance was like that of a very precious jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal... The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp” (Rev. 21:11, 23). Realizing this makes me

² A.W. Tozer: *Renewed Day by Day: A Daily Devotional* (Camp Hill, PA: Christian Publications, 1980), Feb. 7.

excited about what it means to be a Christian, what it means to be part of Christ's glorious church, the building of which is the greatest building project in all eternity.

A FIRM FOUNDATION

In introducing his teaching on the church, Paul directs our attention to the all-important matter of the church's foundation. When erecting a building, nothing is more important than laying a solid and true foundation. Paul therefore says that the church is "built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone" (Eph. 2:20).

This means that if the foundation is the apostles and prophets, then that foundation is laid only once. You do not build by laying a foundation over and over. You build one foundation and then build upward from it.

You sometimes hear today of new apostles. But biblically this is impossible. The apostles were the earthly disciples of Jesus, who bore his own authority in the world and were direct agents of his revelation. By definition, there can be no apostles today, both because no one can fulfill these requirements and because a builder only lays a foundation once. The Roman Catholic Church claims that the pope sits in Peter's office, with his apostolic authority, giving him the right to interpret and even contradict Scripture. But this is impossible, because the apostles' task was to lay the foundation; we now are building up on that foundation and the apostles' work need not and cannot be repeated.

What did the apostles do in building the church's foundation? In part, they built the foundation by founding the first churches in accordance with God's will. But most significantly, the apostles wrote down for us the completed revelation of God's Word in the New Testament. As one hymn puts it, "How firm a foundation, ye saints of the Lord, is laid for your faith in his excellent Word!"³

Paul speaks of "the foundation of the apostles and prophets." There is some question as to whether this refers to the Old Testament prophets.

³ "How Firm a Foundation," *Rippon's Selection of Hymns*, 1787.

I think this is not likely because in the Greek text these two are grouped together with only one definite article and also because Paul lists the apostles before the prophets, whereas the Old Testament prophets came before the apostles. Paul is probably referring to people who possessed the gift of prophecy spoken of in 1 Corinthians 12 and 13. We need to remember that during the first decades of the church the New Testament was just being written and it was many years before the various books were collected and disseminated. The early churches received God's Word through the apostles, but when the apostles moved on there were prophets who God used to continue giving his Word to the people of that generation. Charismatic churches today believe that the gift of prophecy still exists in the church, but Paul tells us here that like the apostles the New Testament prophets belonged to the foundation-laying apostolic age. Once the Bible was completed, their function, like that of the apostles, no longer existed.

What this means for us today is that our foundation as a church must be the apostolic teaching in the Bible. This does not restrict us to the New Testament, since the apostles based their own preaching on the Old Testament. Of the almost 8,000 verses in the New Testament, it is estimated that more than 2,500 quote or refer to the Old Testament.⁴ The whole Bible must be the basis for all that we do. Just as a foundation bears the weight of a building and sets the pattern for its growth, so the Bible is the foundation for Christ's church. If we are to build safely, strongly, and faithfully then we must make God's Word, the only infallible rule for our faith and practice. The Book of Acts tells us that the church in its earliest days was "devoted to the apostles' teaching" (Acts 2:42), and so must we be today as we are to build upon their foundation.

CHRIST JESUS THE CORNERSTONE

A building is not made secure by just the foundation, but every foundation requires and relies upon a cornerstone. In the building of great stone structures, the first thing you do is place the

⁴ Cf. Richard D. Phillips, Philip G. Ryken, and Mark E. Dever, *The Church: One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2004), 104.

cornerstone, on which everything else rests and depends. In God's living temple that is the church this cornerstone is none other than, Paul says, "Christ Jesus himself." As the famous hymn puts it: "The church's one foundation is Jesus Christ her Lord / She is the new creation, by water and the Word / From heaven he came and sought her to be his holy bride / With his own blood he bought her and for her life he died."⁵

These verses tell us much about Jesus as the cornerstone of the church and correspond perfectly with everything Paul has taught in Ephesians 2. The church consists of those people redeemed and purchased by Jesus with his own precious blood. Ephesians 2:13 says we who were far away were "brought near by the blood of Christ."

Jesus also created the church through the power of his resurrection. He has created "in himself one new man," says verse 14, in the place of all the divisions of the world and by the power of his Holy Spirit. Finally, Christ is the cornerstone because he is Lord over the church. Ephesians 1:22-23 said that God "gave him as head over all things to the church, which is his body."

This tells us about the relationship between Christ and the apostles. They are the foundation and he is the cornerstone. You sometimes hear today that we don't really know what Jesus himself taught, since we only have the version provided to us by the apostles. But that is in direct contradiction of the Bible's teaching. On the night of his arrest, Jesus told the disciples that his Spirit would come and "guide you into all truth... He will take what is mine and declare it to you" (Jn. 16:13-14). Before ascending into glory, Jesus breathed the Spirit upon them and said, "You will be my witnesses" (Acts 1:8). Paul himself was commissioned as an apostle by Jesus himself on the Damascus Road. Jesus said to him, "I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you as a servant and witness" (Acts 26:16).

Just as the foundation is the extension of the cornerstone, following its lines and anchored by its strength, so the apostles were Christ's own extension into the world. The apostles and their teaching derive their authority from Jesus and we are to treat their words in the Bible as his

⁵ Samuel J. Stone, "The Church's One Foundation," 1866.

own Word to us. In a derivative way, the same is true of us today, and especially of those set apart to the ministry of God's Word. We are to follow Christ's example, we are to serve Christ by the Spirit that he sends, and we are to make God's Word our source of spiritual authority and the only one we need.

THE CHURCH DOOR

According to Paul, Jesus Christ is in the building business. Speaking of the gospel, Jesus promised to Peter, "On this rock I will build my church" (Mt. 16:16). Like a magnificent cathedral, Christ's church continues to be built, not one brick but one believer at a time.

And like the billboard says, Jesus starts by buying ugly houses. But he does not just patch them up and sell them. He fills them with glory by his own Spirit. He works a new creation. It begins in our rebirth and continues all through our lives. We are being spiritually renovated with divine power. He gives us a new heart, renews our minds, and fills our souls with the light of God. He is the master builder and he is himself the cornerstone.

But there is one more thing about Jesus and the church. He is also its door. Jesus is the only way you can enter this spiritual house, the only way you can be built into this living temple that is filled with God's glory. Jesus said, "I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved" (Jn. 10:9).

This is illustrated by the story of a young woman who came to church with a friend and soon realized that there was something seriously different about it. People talked about having a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Someone asked her a jarring question: "If you were to die tonight and stand before God, and if he were to ask you, 'Why should I let you into my heaven?' what would you say?" She answered that she had received the sacraments and that though not perfect she was a basically good person. She then was invited to ask the question back, and the Christian answered in a very different way. He said his only hope was that Jesus Christ had died on the cross for his sins. When the conversation was over, she turned to her friend and said, "Wow, those answers were completely different!" The

church's pastor later remembered: "Even though she was not yet a Christian, she could see that there was an eternity of difference between asking God to accept her on her own merits and asking him to let what Jesus did count for her. Not long afterwards the Holy Spirit brought her to saving faith in Jesus Christ."⁶

This is the key point for anyone who is not part of God's great and spiritual house, who is not God's child, and does not know what it means to be a citizen in God's kingdom. The only way you can be saved from your sins and enter into the blessings of God is through faith in Jesus Christ. He is the door, and if you will believe in him you will be saved. Then you will become a part of his glorious church, the temple he is building for the dwelling of God forever.

But let me complete the woman's story for the sake of those who already believe. Some time later, the woman reflected on what had happened and lamented that in all the years she had attended church no one had ever given her the gospel. No one explained the cross and the free gift of salvation through faith alone. She had thought it was just up to her to be good enough for God. Do you see why it is important that we build the church in the right way – upon the gospel foundation of the apostles and on the cornerstone that is Christ, with Jesus himself as the door? Jesus said, "If anyone enters by me, he will be saved." If we bring people into the church through any other door than Christ himself, then we do not bring them to salvation. They may be happy here, they may have felt needs met, but they will not be saved. We can bring people in through all sorts of different doors, literally and figuratively. But they will only be saved and they will only be a part of God's spiritual house if they enter through Christ, if they trust in his life and death resurrection for their salvation.

I praise the Lord that woman had a church near her where she could come, to which a caring Christian invited her, and where the gospel was not only preached from the pulpit but shared by a whole church of living witnesses. That is the kind of church God is calling us to be, and if we are but faithful to our Lord we are promised that by the

⁶ Phillips, Ryken, and Dever, 114-115.

Spirit he will build us up together “into a holy temple in the Lord... into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit” (Eph. 2:21-22).